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SUBJECT: SHIA MINISTER CLAIMS BERRI TRICKED HIZBALLAH, NOW AT ODDS WITH NASRALLAH

BEIRUT 00002699 001.3 OF 003

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (S/NF) Minister of Health (Shia, member of Amal) Mohammed Khalifeh (please protect throughout) told the Ambassador in a 8/18 meeting that Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri and Hizballah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah are currently at odds. By Khalifeh's account, Berri was infuriated by Nasrallah's 8/14 "victory speech." Wanting to rein in Hizballah, the Speaker essentially tricked Hizballah ministers into agreeing to the 8/16 cabinet decision on deployment of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) to the south, even though part of the decision went beyond Nasrallah's "red lines." Nasrallah and Berri, however, maintain agreement on certain "red lines," including no NATO presence in Lebanon and no international soldiers along the Syrian-Lebanese border. Khalifeh claimed his own small victory, saying that his tour of the south restored GOL control to hospitals and clinics that Hizballah had tried to occupy. Citing health records and anecdotal evidence, Khalifeh estimated that 300-400 Hizballah fighters had been killed. He gave a gruesome account of wounded Hizballah fighters who emerged from underground bunkers after the Israelis pulled back. No fan of Hizballah, Khalifeh thought that the "victory atmosphere" would die down and that the people of the south would soon sober up to the losses they suffered because of a conflict Hizballah provoked. But, at the same time, hatred of Israel and the United States is prevalent everywhere in the south, Khalifeh said, and will not fade. End summary.

NASRALLAH, BERRI AT ODDS

¶2. (S/NF) Asking to receive the Ambassador at his home (away from media and his staff), Khalifeh -- one of the Shia cabinet ministers loyal to Berri -- claimed that Berri and Nasrallah are not currently speaking to each other. Khalifeh, who has long complained to us that Berri has been too deferential to Nasrallah (allowing, in his view, Amal to be swallowed up by Hizballah), was clearly delighted by this turn of events. With whispered gusto as the TV blared to interfere with any listening devices, he said that the Berri-Nasrallah spat stems from two developments. First, Berri was furious by Nasrallah's 8/14 "victory speech," in which Nasrallah "acted like he thought he was bigger than Salahaddin, bigger than all of us!"

HIZBALLAH DEFINES RED LINES
FOR CABINET DECISION

¶3. (S/NF) Second, Nasrallah is furious that Berri tricked the Shia cabinet ministers into approving the 8/16 cabinet decision that deployed the LAF to the south. The decision, Khalifeh explained, exceeded what Nasrallah could accept. Khalifeh said that Nasrallah, through messengers, had told Berri that Hizballah was prepared to concur with the LAF deployment to the south and would permit the LAF to confiscate any weapons it stumbled across. But Hizballah was not prepared to turn over its fixed positions to the LAF. Most important, Hizballah wanted an understanding that certain parts of south Lebanon would remain off limits to the LAF and thus effectively off-limits to the beefed-up UNIFIL.

¶4. (S/NF) Berri, Khalifeh said, wore down Hizballah on the fixed positions issue, eventually persuading Nasrallah that, given that the Israelis knew where the fixed positions were and had so damaged them, they were a liability, not an asset, for Hizballah. But Nasrallah would not budge on maintaining "no-go" areas in the south. Berri and Siniora, meanwhile, agreed fully that the LAF had to have the right to

go anywhere in the country, that no area of the south could be off limits to the LAF. Berri took particular offense by Nasrallah's assertion that the national army would have to defer to Hizballah even in a cabinet statement. Berri told Siniora not to worry, that the cabinet would pass the LAF deployment decree unanimously, with the "no-go" areas eliminated.

USING A DIFFERENT MESSENGER
TO FOOL HIZBALLAH MINISTERS

¶ 15. (S/NF) During the cabinet meeting, Berri then called Minister of Agriculture Talal Sahali. (Lebanon's cabinet sessions are constantly interrupted by calls to the ministers from the political bosses -- Saad Hariri calling Siniora, Walid Jumblatt calling Marwan Hamadeh, etc.). Berri told Sahali to vote yes for the measure and to tell Khalifeh and Foreign Affairs Minister Salloukh to do the same. Given the close coordination between Berri and Nasrallah throughout this crisis, Hizballah's two ministers took Sahali's action to mean that Nasrallah was on board, and the measure passed quickly and without debate, with Trad Hamadeh and Mohammed Fneish concurring. (Indeed, other ministers have told us that they were amazed at how uneventful the 8/16 cabinet meeting was, considering how close the cabinet had come to a breakdown over the deployment details only a few days earlier.)

¶ 16. (S/NF) Later, Nasrallah read the details of the cabinet decision and exploded. When the Hizballah ministers confronted Berri, Berri responded that he consistently uses Khalifeh to pass messages to the Shia ministers -- a true assertion -- when there has been an Amal-Hizballah agreement on something. The Hizballah ministers should have realized that something coming from Sahali is of a different nature. Had they checked, they could have voted no; no one forced them to vote yes. Not willing to split the cabinet or the Shia solidarity or admit that they'd been fooled into approving something without checking with their master, the Hizballah ministers -- and Nasrallah -- begrudgingly accepted the cabinet decision.

BUT BERRI AND NASRALLAH
MAINTAIN SOME COMMON RED LINES

¶ 17. (S/NF) The Ambassador asked Khalifeh if he thought there was some unwritten understanding that, while the LAF indeed received the right from the cabinet to go anywhere, in fact the LAF would not push. Khalifeh said that he expected that would be the case at first, but the LAF will become stronger and stronger, eventually able to assert its authority everywhere, which Berri is counting on. The Ambassador asked Khalifeh whether Berri and Nasrallah, despite their current spat, maintained any common "red lines" about implementation of UNSCR 1701. "Absolutely," Khalifeh responded, tapping his fingers to tip off a list: "Nothing that looks or smells like NATO," he said; "we cannot accept NATO here, period." Second, even if there is a second resolution, it cannot be Chapter VII. Third, no foreign troops along the Syrian-Lebanese border.

¶ 18. (S/NF) Accepting any of these conditions, Khalifeh said, would be akin to Lebanon throwing itself back into a mandate status. "We become Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine (STET)." The Ambassador, pulling out the UNSCR 1701 text, reviewed with Khalifeh the unambiguous paragraphs on arms smuggling and border controls, noting that Lebanon has clear obligations. Moreover, the Ambassador said, Speaker Berri has a real interest in seeing that Hizballah cannot resupply its arsenals. Khalifeh argued that Lebanon must do the border controls, perhaps with high-tech help, but not with foreign troops. The Ambassador cautioned Khalifeh that the air and sea blockade on Lebanon will continue until the international community has confidence that border controls are being improved, and a quick way to do so would be to ask UNIFIL's help, per the resolution. "Berri will never accept

that, "" Khalifeh said, ""never! You can't ask him." " The Ambassador tried to make the point that tightened border controls with international assistance strengthened the state, not weakened it.

HOPING THE SOUTH SOBERS UP,
ANTI-AMERICANISM ON THE RISE

¶9. (C/NF) Changing the subject, Khalifeh described what he saw on his two-day tour of southern Lebanon. The destruction in some villages, he said, was ""unbelievable, far worse than the civil war." " He thought that, as the extent of the damage sinks in, the population would stop being ""drunk on victory"" and start questioning the Hizballah policies that provoked the Israeli wrath. In the long term, he claimed, Hizballah will suffer. But he said that he found the hatred of the United States and Israel to be very high. ""The people think you are as guilty as Israel,"" Khalifeh said, telling stories of even Christian villagers blaming the United States for providing cluster bombs and political support for what is seen as indiscriminate targeting of civilians. They may get around to blaming Hizballah -- ""let's hope they do"" -- but that doesn't mean that their hatred for the United States and Israel will drop, Khalifeh predicted.

COUNTING THE DEAD --
HIZBALLAH LOSES 300-400 FIGHTERS

¶10. (S/NF) The Ambassador, noting that estimates of infrastructure damage appeared to be exaggerated for political reasons, asked about the actual death toll. Khalifeh said that there were somewhere between 850 and 875 bodies identified and claimed. In addition, there were approximately 300 corpses in mass graves or in hospital morgues that had not been identified or claimed. Those in graves were photographed, described, and DNA samples removed, in case people seek missing relatives. Some of those were probably Hizballah fighters that Hizballah does not want to publicly acknowledge, but many of the unclaimed bodies are also elderly and in some cases entire families. In addition, he said, he guessed from gathering anecdotal information that Hizballah had independently buried about 100 of its fighters out of sight, to prevent its real losses from being known.

¶11. (S/NF) Going through a complicated accounting process of whom Hizballah acknowledged was killed, how many of the unclaimed bodies were of fighting-age men, and how many Hizballahis might have been buried surreptitiously, Khalifeh estimated that the Israelis killed 300-400 Hizballah fighters. That number is actually quite a blow, he said, and will also help make the population think twice about Hizballah as the losses become more known. Khalifeh then gave some gruesome accounts of Hizballah fighters who emerged from hiding and sought medical attention only after the IDF started pulling back. In one gut-wrenching example, Khalifeh pointed to his shin, saying that one fighter had a huge wound and burns in his lower leg. Although he stopped the bleeding, he did not seek medical attention for 15 days. By the time he saw a doctor, maggots had penetrated up his rotting leg tissue as high as his thigh. ""Who are these people?"" Khalifeh said; ""how could you stay like that? Did someone make him stay like that?""

RESTORING CENTRAL AUTHORITY IN HEALTH

¶12. (S/NF) Khalifeh expressed deep pride that he had planted the flag of the central state during his tour. Accompanied by ISF forces, Khalifeh reclaimed hospitals and clinics that Hizballah had started to occupy, to compensate for the destruction of Hizballah's facilities. Except for those state health clinics damaged beyond use, Khalifeh said that he had restored Ministry of Health control to all health institutions in the south. The Ambassador noted that the GOL should be more assertive across the board, and Khalifeh agreed.

COMMENT

¶13. (S/NF) We don't doubt Khalifeh's hatred of Hizballah, and his account of the cabinet deliberations explains the curious lack of controversy and discussion last Wednesday -- after political fireworks during the preceding cabinet session. But we also think that he was trying to place his boss Berri in a more heroic light for us. Berri may indeed have been able to trick Nasrallah this one time. But Berri is nevertheless very much the junior partner and does not yet seem willing to confront Hizballah frontally. For example, if Berri were willing to join with the March 14 movement in removing Emile Lahoud from the Presidency, then we would could truly classify him as a courageous leader. And as for the Nasrallah-Berri ""red lines,"" we can probably avoid provoking the Shia on the NATO issue, making sure that any NATO countries' security or troop contributions to Lebanon do not come in explicit NATO packaging. But we will have to keep pushing on the international element that is clearly needed along the Syrian border and at entry points, including at the airport and seaports.

FELTMAN